

# GIRLS EDUCATION MOVEMENT

## South Africa



# ISSUE

## A better South Africa

In today's South Africa, girls and boys stand a better chance to develop and prosper. Since the birth of the new democracy in 1994, the country's economy has grown significantly at an average of 4.5 percent and individual freedom and liberties have been vastly expanded. South Africa is now a middle-income economy with a strong emerging market, an abundant supply of natural resources, well-developed financial, legal, communications, energy and transport sectors and a stock exchange that ranks among the ten largest in the world. The South African Constitution, built on an acute awareness of the injustices of the past, is widely regarded as the most progressive in the world.

## Dashed hopes for many

The prospect of a bright future is however out of reach for many of South Africa's children. The country's economic growth has not been able to tame unemployment, which was estimated at 25.2 percent in 2005. Daunting problems remain from the apartheid era – especially poverty and the lack of economic empowerment for South Africans from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

*“Resources have been poured into schools in order to ensure equal treatment. However, resources are not enough...research indicates that we are not seeing the outcomes in terms of quality education that were anticipated.”*

Government schools grapple with many challenges including a poor quality of education, high attrition rates, low teacher morale, the devastating impact of HIV and AIDS, poor infrastructure, inadequate water and sanitation and poor mechanisms for inclusive education particularly for children with disabilities. Many learners from poor families go to school hungry. Girls and young women still report high levels of sexual abuse, harassment, exploitation and murder in their schools.

## FACTS & FIGURES

96% of South African children aged 7–13 are enrolled in primary education.

70% of children aged 14–17 go to secondary school.

9% of school-aged children repeat a grade in primary school.

In 2004/05, there were more than 55,000 reported rapes in South Africa.

40% of reported rapes were committed against children during 2004/05.

10.2% of young South Africans aged 15–24 are infected with HIV.

Girls and women are four times more likely to be HIV-positive than boys and men.

Sources: UNICEF and the South African Police Service.

## Key challenges to girls' education

**Gender Inequality:** South African society is to a large extent patriarchal. Girls and women are accorded lower social status and find themselves under the control and authority of men. The high levels of gender-based violence and the higher HIV infection rates among girls and women are tragic consequences of female disempowerment. Girls are socialised to become home keepers and child-bearers, placing less value on their educational attainment. When girls perform well in subjects such as maths or science, they are not encouraged nor do they have the confidence to pursue careers that rely on these skills.

**Safety and Security:** Many schools are not child or girl friendly. Some are situated far from homes, exposing girls to danger when they walk to and from school. Girls are at risk of being sexually harassed and exploited in schools by teachers and fellow students.

The *Report of the Public Hearing on the Right to Basic Education* states:

*“Of great concern were the accounts of teachers taking advantage of their positions of authority and coercing sex from girls. An example was given of a learner coming late and having to exchange sex with a teacher in order to be allowed onto the school premises that had been locked.”*

The lack of separate school toilets for boys and girls increases girls' vulnerability to sexual violence. Teenage pregnancies, which are said to be on the rise, are still stigmatised, making it difficult for young mothers to continue their studies despite legislation that protects their right to education.

**Impact of HIV and AIDS:** Almost a million children under the age of 15 have lost their parents or caregivers to AIDS. Girls often drop out of school to look after sick family members and younger siblings. Many teachers are succumbing to HIV and AIDS.

Sexually active children and young people do not have sufficient access to testing, counseling and treatment because of the lack of access to child and youth friendly health services. A culture of taboo and silence revolves around matters such as sexuality, sex and reproductive health, making it difficult for children to get accurate knowledge to protect themselves.

# ACTION

## Children doing it for themselves

In 2003, the South African Minister of Education launched the Girls' Education Movement (GEM) in Parliament. UNICEF supported the National Department of Education to roll out GEM in all of the country's nine provinces.

GEM is an African child-driven grassroots movement where children and young people in schools and communities throughout the continent work to bring positive changes in the lives of African girls and boys. GEM aims to:

- Give girls equal access to education
- Improve the quality of education, especially in disadvantaged rural schools
- Make the school curriculum and school books gender responsive
- Create schools that are safe and secure for children, especially girls
- Work with boys as strategic partners
- Reduce gender-based violence
- Abolish harmful cultural practices such as early marriage for girls

It is now widely recognized that investments in girls benefit the whole of society. Educated girls become women who participate in the social, economic and political life of their nation. Educated women are more likely to be healthy, have smaller families and to have healthy and educated sons and daughters.

### A South African flavour

In South Africa, GEM is a dynamic vehicle that mobilises school communities to become more responsive to the needs and rights of the girl child. It is integrated into a broader UNICEF and Government of South Africa 'Child Friendly

School Plus (CFS+)' programme. The 'plus' means that schools are also encouraged to

become centres of care and support for orphans and other vulnerable children.

An important component of the child-friendly school concept and GEM is training pupils in peer education and life skills. In this way, schools become a means of reaching the wider community with information on how to prevent gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS, address drug

abuse, discuss sexuality and stress the importance of girls' education.

Giving children a voice and a chance to participate in decisions that will affect them at home, in school and the community at large contributes to building tremendous self-esteem and courage through empowerment. Children are therefore more likely to stand up for themselves and take action against negative impacts on their lives.

A good example is the case of a 15 year-old girl in Limpopo who was married off to a much older man. She dropped out of school after the marriage. Her female classmates went to the house where she lived with the man and started chanting and singing for her to come back to school. This went on for days until the husband became so irritated that he called the young girl's parents to take her back (story shared with the author by Mary Monelela, Deputy Chief Education Specialist, National Department of Education).

### Girls and boys unite

GEM is implemented through school-based clubs. Clubs are not the exclusive domain of girls but include boys as 'strategic partners' in gender transformation. "I am my sister's keeper" is what boys are encouraged to em



brace. With UNICEF support, more than 2,500 learners and educators have been trained since 2002 as trainers in the theory and practice of gender responsiveness that is fundamental to GEM. They are in turn training peers in their schools on how to best work through GEM.

Since many schools already have extracurricular clubs, they are encouraged to incorporate GEM principles into existing activities. Different schools interpret GEM in their own way and activities are as varied. Examples of GEM activities include:

- Teams of girls and boys cleaning their school yard on a regular basis so an attractive learning environment is created for all,
- A suggestion box at school in which children can anonymously report cases of sexual abuse,
- A drama group that performs skits, plays and songs on gender-related topics.

With support from UNICEF and input from students, teachers and parents, the Department of Education is designing training manuals, brochures, posters and pamphlets. These will be used to strengthen the positive impact GEM is already having in many schools.

There are also plans to expand GEM to include exchange programmes with other African countries.

### **Technogirls**

The *Technogirls* project supports and guides girls in making informed career and life choices, with an emphasis on professions using maths, science and technology. School girls aged between 15 and 18 are drawn from previously disadvantaged communities, with participants from rural areas are given priority. Learners come from public schools and are selected on the basis on their scholastic potential. They are placed in corporate companies where they undergo a mentoring and skills development programme with opportunities for scholarships.

Technogirls further builds on and supports the values of GEM in that it aims to tap into the value of young women and allows them to excel in the previously male-dominated fields of science and technology. It creates a platform for young girls to gain experience as interns in companies and organisations that could support their growth and development in these areas. Technogirls therefore become the vehicle to realise the values of independence and girls' rights to achieve their maximum potential in every social arena of their choice.

# IMPACT

- 👤 GEM has placed **girls' education** on the agenda of the South African government. UNICEF was actively involved in establishing GEM in South Africa from the very start. UNICEF has developed a strong partnership with the National Department of Education and has helped the department scale up GEM to all nine of the country's provinces by 2006.
- 👤 UNICEF is supporting 164 primary schools in Limpopo, KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape to become '**child friendly plus**'. Many of these schools are also incorporating GEM as part of their efforts to promote girls' education.
- 👤 GEM is seen as an **effective way** of responding to the three inter-related threats to girls' education in South Africa – gender inequality, violence in schools and the impact of HIV and AIDS.
- 👤 GEM encourages **youth participation** and empowerment. By giving children the opportunity to find solutions to problems affecting their lives, they become actors in the development of their schools, communities and nation.
- 👤 In a patriarchal society where girls do not have full control over their bodies and lives, GEM is a vehicle for **female empowerment**. When girls acquire life skills and feel supported by their peers and caring adults, they become confident enough to take charge of their lives and put a stop to abuse and violence.
- 👤 Bringing boys on board as **strategic partners** teaches both sexes that they can work together and not against each other to create a better South Africa for all
- 👤 The **Technogirls** project gives girls broader horizons and shows them that they can succeed in traditionally male-dominated professions. To date, 34 'technogirls' in the Eastern Cape have been placed in mining companies and 20 girls will get scholarships to study mining.

## A Day in My Life

*By Fhulufhelo Jessica Mamelasigidi*

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*'A day in the life of a young South African girl is not an easy task at all!'*

I wake up to a new day - with what I hope and aspire to accomplish that day. I get out of bed and wake up my younger brothers and sisters and try to motivate them for the day ahead. Being the eldest girl in my family, it is my duty to prepare a healthy breakfast for all and make lunch for school for everybody. (Playing the role of caregiver.) I walk my younger brother and sister to crèche and only after that, when I am finally on my way to school, can I play the role of Jessica, "The Learner".

I am in a multi-racial class with classmates of different cultures, religions and backgrounds. My concentration is fully focussed on the teacher, listening to every word he or she is saying. I sit in my seat striving to receive the education my parents were deprived of, knowing I am a girl and it is against my tradition for a female to attend school and be educated. However I sit in class holding my future in my heart, trying to overcome society and the prejudice that still exists against a young girl being educated.

In each class a different teacher stands, each with a different gender, race, and culture. I try to show that I as a young South African woman am just as worthy to an education as the boy sitting next to me. My school is a good source of encouragement especially when it comes to its female learners. With the schools motto being "Factum non Verbum" (The deed not the word) I try to live by this motto and to perform the deed, and I am encouraged to aim higher.

At the end of the school day I prepare my self for battle on the sports field. I persevere through the afternoon playing my best trying to prove that sportswomen are just as good as sportsmen.

I go home to play the role of 'sis' Jessica, in the late afternoon. I clean the house, fetch my younger brother and sister from crèche and make sure I have started dinner before my mother gets home. I am always wanting to lash out at her and express what I really feel, wanting to tell her: "NO I do not want to become a wife, "NO, I do not want to become a mother, and "NO, I do not want to become an employee at this age!" – Why doesn't she just leave me to be educated and develop into the empowered women I want to be?

Once my chores are done I start to do my homework, study for the test the next day and end up burning the candle until mid-night.

Tired, energy-drained and fatigued, I go to bed and pray to thy Father in Heaven. I get into bed and close my eyes, I listen to the sound of drums beating in the distance and to the ancestors singing " Mosadi wa nnete o aga lelapa" (a real woman should create a family) and slowly, slowly

I drift into a deep sleep...

*This essay is part of a UNICEF-sponsored Voice of Youth writing competition on gender, lifeskills and HIV and AIDS.*

# FUTURE ACTIVITIES

GEM is now part and parcel of the government's strategy for girls' education and is a nationwide programme. GEM is set on course to forge more partnerships and increase dialogue between girls and boys, men and women, young and old, and different sectors of society.

*"We are pushing for GEM to become a community-based initiative,"* says Mary Monelela, the Deputy Chief Education Specialist at the National Department of Education.

Future activities that will be supported by UNICEF include:

- An **impact evaluation** in August 2006 to provide a basis for effective monitoring and evaluation of GEM.
- Bringing children from all provinces to participate in the national **Gender in Education conference** in late August 2006.
- Conducting a **snap audit** of GEM in July 2006 and creating a GEM database with vital indicators that can be used for tracking purposes. The audit is currently underway.
- Supporting the **national GEM camp** in December 2006 where children from all nine provinces will be brought together to exchange experiences, receive further training and mobilise them to set up more GEM clubs.